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ABSTRACT

In view of the increasing interest in the mass media's role in the creation, maintenance, transformation, and celebration of whole cultures, the Australian experience with nationalistic mythmaking in film and television should be examined. Research reveals that Australians prefer watching Australian programs to watching British or American programs, which indicates that each distinct culture in the world would prefer viewing programs sensitive to its own mythology. In addition to very basic myths, such as those dealing with unchanging human nature and the absence of social conflict, local Australian variations of these themes exist. American and British domination of Australian programming has given way to productions that are uniquely Australian and that exhibit Australian archetypes. Some attempts to include Australian folklore are more deliberate than others. However, in spite of the fact that national mythology affects telecommunications policy differently in different cultures, producers of films and television programs should study their mythology and exploit it in order to capture their national audiences. Three pages of references conclude the report. (DF)

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NATIONAL MYTHOLOGY ON TELEVISION: THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE.

by

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National Mythology on Television: The Australian Experience

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference of this symposium state that in recent years there has been increasing interest in the role of mass media, especially television, in the creation, maintenance, transformation and celebration of whole cultures. The mass media are seen as one of the major institutions through which a community, either national or local, or even a subculture, makes meaning.

This contribution concerns itself with the national community. Specifically, it is concerned with the deliberate commercial or government-aided policy of nationalistic mythmaking in film and television (or "the audiovisual" as the French (Mattelart, 1984) call it). Furthermore, it concentrates on the Australian experience as an important case study with implications for many nations.

When, in 1982, the French Ministry of Culture set up a research commission to explore the possibility of a "Latin Audiovisual Space," which amongst other objectives, was to seek the

"protection of cultural products," it chose the Australian experience for emulation. Specifically, it noted that the publicity surrounding the success of American series throughout the world also hid the fact that in numerous countries the indigenous or national series had higher ratings. For example, in Australia, the commission explained, the locally-produced domestic dramas outrated Dallas and Dynasty when they were in direct competition (Mattelart, p. 102). This finding was unexpected by the Australian commercial interests which were quite happy to transmit the profitable American fare. As Windschuttle (1983, p. 412) relates: "Forced to broadcast various quotas of Australian made programmes, the stations found they were far and away the most popular fare regularly seen on television." While the overall purpose of the Mattelart report was to provide information to the Latin cultures as to how they could resist the onslaught of American culture via the media, the pertinent question here is: Why should the Australian experience be chosen as exemplary?

The answer to that question is that the Australian programs tapped into Australian mythology and this was most pleasing to the Australian audiences. Similarly, it would seem that a corollary to that proposition is that each distinct culture in the world would prefer its own mythology on television if it were available. While all the world shares the dominant American mass-mediated mythology, the American audience is familiar only

with its own. As Nordenstreng (1974) has documented, the flow of information is largely one-way.

Before we can discuss the attractiveness of national mythology any further, we must keep in mind that in any study of mythology of the media, it is important to keep in mind an axiom that is accepted by the standard cultural anthropological texts (Kottack, p. 345). This axiom states that one of the attributes of myth is that myths are accepted unknowingly by those whom they hold in thrall. Harold Schechter (1979) quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson (1912) to give anecdotal support to this thesis. According to Emerson, distance is essential if we are to recognize our own myths and "therefore we cannot say what is our mythology."

This poses a very real difficulty in an investigation concerning the nature of myth in media. For example, with regard to the French (Mattelart) report, Dallas provided a motif throughout the report as exemplifying the archetypal American television program (p. 90). Continual reference was made to such items as its plot, and the players and their ethics. The fact that the report zeroed in on one single archetypal program shows that the report itself presented a case of reflexive mythologizing, or mythologizing about mythology and, as such, would provide scholars using coorientation techniques an opportunity for a classic case study of American mythologizing as seen through foreign, namely French, eyes.

While one must concede that the French scholars have the advantage of distance from the culture to be qualified critics of, to use Tunstall's (1977) words, the dominant Anglo-American media culture, it is also fair comment to say that they were themselves working within a mythological model. And so it is with anyone looking at a mythology. The observer should always ask, "What mythological preconceptions, be they national, professional specialization, gender bias, racial or religious acculturation, are being assumed?" So without endorsing all their perceptions, it is taken as given that the Australian media experience, which certainly operates within what the French call "Anglo-saxon culture," had constructed a mythology which had been chosen as a model to provide a possible bulwark against American cultural imperialism.

More pertinently, however, if the French scholars are correct, one must return to the question: why should the Australian experience of conscious myth-making on television be so successful? To answer this question, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the origins of modern mythology and to know something of Australia's media history.

Myths in the Western Media

The exploration or origins inevitably requires turning to basic

definitions, one of the most useful of which has been supplied by W. Lance Bennett. Myths, according to Bennett (1980), are the basic models of society and are correlated with their corresponding rituals which are the social routines through which the myths are applied. In America, political myths and rituals guide the processes in which policies are made and public opinion is formed. Bennett then claimed that the body of myth is the basis of political consciousness in American society.

One can accept this definition and vision and still be unsatisfied by it. It does not provide any insight into the reason why myths are so pleasing, and why they have to be invisible to those they hold in thrall. To understand the latter question, one must leave the realm of political science and look to the literary critic, Roland Barthes.

Barthes claimed that, "Myth is a type of speech....it is a mode of signification, a form." Barthes further claimed that, "...everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse," (Barthes, 1980, p. 109).

If this definition is accepted then one is also able to accept abstract formulations without overt narrative structure as myths. Such are Herbert Schiller's (1980) formulation of the myths that structure media content. These are quintessentially American, of course, but have been spread worldwide by the American influence in the world. They are: the myth of

individualism and personal choice, the myth of neutrality, the myth of unchanging human nature, the myth of the absence of social conflict, and the myth of media pluralism.

Myths in the Australian media

Schiller's myths are alive and well in Australia, but there are local variations on the themes. For example, with regard to the myth of individualism and personal choice, the sociologists tell us (Renwick, 1980) that while Americans value individual effort, Australians value collective effort. Just as the American individualistic ethic is self-evident in any number of films and TV programs, and ranges much further than the John Wayne and Rambo stereotype, the Australian collective ethos can be found in the classic films such as The Overlanders (1946) (Breen, 1982) and in the three more recent war films discussed later. Also, as Donald Horne (1985) has pointed out, Australians have their own myths. These he defines as: "those beliefs that have the magical quality of transforming complex events and actions into simple meanings that explain and justify action and that, whether altogether false or partly true, have the transforming effect of hiding the contradictions and inadequacies of reality." Horne claimed that: "Myths make a good introduction to society because

the further they are from reality, the more they may tell us about society's tensions." He takes as examples of the Australian legitimating myths the Australian concept of "federalism" and "the crown." Examples of the mythology associated with the "prestigious metonym" of the crown are found in legal usage. For example, "the crown" arrests alleged wrongdoers, and it is to "the crown" that military officers swear allegiance. A telling example of this phenomenon was taken from the transcript of a special government investigation, which is called in Australia, appropriately enough for this context, a Royal Commission. A police commissioner testified: "I felt my loyalties were to the Crown and beyond the elected government."

In his book on Australian media, Keith Windschuttle (1984, p. 279) discusses the concept of myth within a peculiarly Australian context, but his definition can be extrapolated to the wider world:

> A great proportion of popular culture, including much of the news, embodies the qualities of myth. "Myth" is not used here in its popular usage where it means beliefs or opinions that are false: rather it is meant in the anthropologists' sense, which is independent of truth or falsity. A myth in this sense is a story, factually based or fictional, a literary theme or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a social group by embodying its ideals for itself or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions.

To take an example of nationalistic myth, many countries cherish their nationalist myths of grievance, and the Australians

are no exception. The nationalistic mythologies of our time include Hitler's grievance of the alleged betrayal of Germany in World War One by international Jewry (Hitler, 1943), the Irish grievance for British hegemony which led to the formation of the state of Eire, the grievance for the massacre of Jews in Europe which provided additional motivation for the setting up of the state of Israel, and the concomitant grievance of the Palestine Liberation Organization with their mythology of a lost homeland.

Chronicled in innumerable Sunday supplements for many years, and more recently in film and television, are two admittedly less world-shattering Australian myths of grievance against the United States. In 1917, a boxer named Les Darcy, a contender for the world title, died, presumably poisoned, in America. Even today American travellers in Australia can be quite mystified when regaled with the folktale of how "the Yanks killed Les Darcy and Phar Lap!" A little over a decade later the other Australian sporting great was poisoned in America on the threshold of world renown. In a uniquely Australian tribute to the rituals of a popular national pastime, the body of Phar Lap the mythical race horse can be seen today in a museum in Melbourne. Just as the Soviets line up to see the embalmed body of Lenin, so the Australians make the pilgrimage to see Phar Lap's stuffed hide.

Australia's Media History

To understand what gave impetus to the energy behind the dissemination of Australian mythology in the media it is necessary to know something of Australian media history. In the 1930's American and British interests bought up the Australian distribution channels and closed down the indigenous industry which up until that time had been profitable. For the next forty years Australian audiences provided a lucrative market for the American and British product. Because film is a cultural artifact as well as being a saleable commodity, the Australian audiences became saturated with American culture. With the arrival of television in 1956, the same pattern emerged, so much so in fact that by 1964, Wilson Dizard could report, "The daily schedule of a typical Australian television station is, particularly in prime listening hours, virtually indistinguishable from that of a station in Iowa or New Jersey."

During the 1970's it became government policy to subsidize film production. Similarly, commercial television stations were given a "points system" which monitored their compliance with the provision of their licences to provide a certain amount of the indigenous product. When one considers the history of Australian film, and the long period of the suppression of indigenous

expression, Donald Horne's insight into the fact that the myths betray society's tensions is especially apropos of the Renaissance of the Australian film and television miniseries. For example, in contradistinction to Schiller's view that the American media disseminate the myth of the absence of social conflict, the Australian media are acutely aware of class distinction, even if the indigenous Australian mythology falls short of the full-blown marxist myth of class warfare (Renwick, 1980).

In the eighties, a slew of miniseries erupted to mitigate national tensions. Cowra Breakout told the story of a suicidal escape of Japanese prisoners-of-war during World War II. Japan, the erstwhile enemy, now chief trading partner, was portrayed in human terms and the predicted mediation effect of myth (Levi-Strauss, 1969) was evident. Similarly, The Dismissal dealt with a tension-filled constitutional crisis when a Governor General (representing "the Crown") dismissed an elected Prime Minister in 1975. To the myth-filled Australian sporting area the Bodyline series told how the English used foul play to win at cricket in the 1930's. Myths of the convict past (Against the Wind), the bushranger era (The Last Outlaw), and the first world war (Anzacs) also mediated present tensions with surrogate catharsis of tales from Australia's past.

Archetypes: American and Australian

Taking, for example, three films which are Australian in concept and execution which deal with warfare, Breaker Morant(1980), Gallipoli(1981), and The Odd Angry Shot(1979), it is clear to see that their ethos is far removed from that of the Hollywood genre. Breaker Morant, set in the Boer war, has essentially the same theme as Stanley Kubrick's Paths of Glory which was itself a very unusual production for Hollywood. In Breaker Morant, three soldiers were executed to provide an example for their peers and to further the cause of British imperialism. In this film, the British are the baddies.

They are also the villians in Gallipoli which documents the Australian troops' attempted invasion of Turkey in 1915. This myth is well known to all Australians as it is kept alive with the annual ritual of Anzac Day, a solemn public holiday celebrated on April 25th each year. Anzac Day is a kind of Fourth of July without the festivities, and its mythology is of continuing fascination to Australians (Perrottet, 1986). The film narrates a story of young men who are thrust into the horrific reality of war. The Gallipoli experience is to the Australian imagination what Valley Forge is to the American, but it is much more intensely felt. Like Valley Forge it was a trial, but

naturally enough, in the Australian tradition, it was a defeat, not a victory which was to be celebrated.

The third film, The Odd Angry Shot deals with soldiers in Vietnam. Here also a sour note is struck. In this film the class warfare mythology is explicitly invoked as, for example, the old soldier points out to the young soldier that there are not many of the privileged classes in the ranks.

When one considers that for forty years the Australian nation had been without a film industry, it is not remarkable that a representative sample of films on warfare should sound the authentic national cultural note and avoid the standard Hollywood format which was so well known. Clearly, the Australian film comes from a different cultural tradition than does the Hollywood counterpart.

The peculiarly Australian film is, of course, still a rarity on the Australian cinema or television screen which is overwhelmingly dominated by the Hollywood product. It is then taken for granted that Australians share in American culture, or at least that portion of it that is disseminated via the mass media. Much of the Australian output is game shows, soap operas and so forth which are identical with the Anglo-American media product as described by Tunstall (1977).

Also mythmaking of the triumphant American model is going on apace in Australia. Alan Bond, a Welsh-born Australian tycoon, is

a young Howard Hughes archetype in the upcoming series on the winning of the Americas' Cup yacht race. Similarly, a famous Australian poem "The Man From Snowy River" by Banjo Paterson, the author of "Waltzing Matilda," the informal national anthem, has been made into a film. The film of The Man From Snowy River was very much in the middle-John-Ford Western model, starred Kirk Douglas, and was profitable at home and abroad.

Contemporaneously with the surge of nationalism and relative prosperity in Australia (the Australian dollar at one time in the seventies was one-and-a-half times the value of its American counterpart) the American psyche, battered by the triple setback of the Kennedy assassinations, the Vietnam defeat and the disgrace of the presidency via Watergate, was entering an unusual period of relative self-doubt, at least as portrayed in the available texts of film and television. The seventies were the period of The Parallax View, Executive Action, The Three Days of the Condor, All The President's Men, and The China Syndrome; all excellent examples of the cinema of paranoia.

This period in the American national mythology has been well presented by Frank McConnel in Storytelling and Mythmaking (1979, p. 108-109). McConnell documented the build-up of the John Wayne persona in the half century beginning in the 1930's as epitomizing Western romance, and claimed that it had played an important part in the recent political history of America because "the central myths of storytelling always do in a given culture,

however complicatedly."

During the years of American involvement in the disasterous Southeast Asian war, however, "Wayne's mime of authoritarian and withdrawn patriarchy was bound to become, even if he had not involved himself in the debate over the war, a metaphor for what was wrong with us rather than what was best about us."

McConnell's predictions are, then, worth quoting:

> The human mind naturally orders its experience, naturally imposes a form and a sense of the world around it: language and storytelling are species-specific instincts with us. And so it is also, with cultures. They cannot choose but recapitulate the archetypes, for the archetypes are the very way in which cultures exist.

In the ensuing years since McConnell wrote, events have validated his predictions. Recent events have shown that the "archetypes have been recapitulated." The presidency as popular culture has been restored by Ronald Reagan whose invasion of Granada provided better theatre than Jerry Ford's action against the Cambodian navy to rescue the Mayaguez (Lawrence and Timberg, 1979). Similarly, Reagan's actions against Libya also fulfil the expectations of the archetype. It is a corollary of McConnell's thesis that the present popularity of Rambo(1985) and the Rocky series (1977-1985) provides more authentic markers of the real American culture than any of the former films mentioned.

The John Wayne persona never existed in Australian mass culture, except as an everpresent American import.

Deliberate Mythmaking

Just as George Lucas, the producer of the *Star Wars* series set out to mine the bible and the Greek myths for his saga (*Time*, 1980), the Australian filmmakers fell back on their folklore, some instinctively, some deliberately.

I enter now into the participant observation mode. In 1973 I was visiting Sydney and looked up John Sparkes a former colleague from the Australian Broadcasting Commission television. John was then the executive producer of a program called *A Big Country*. It featured documentary stories mostly from the rural sector of the country, and was very popular with the Australian audience which, of course, was city-based as Australia is one of the most urbanized nations on earth. It is still popular. (See Adams, 1986). I asked John what he was doing and he replied succinctly: "I make myths."

In Australia, in the seventies, the idea of consciously formulating a national mythology was in the air, not only among the professionals but also among other interested parties. For example, one could see that Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* was most conspicuous on communication scholars' shelves in the 1970s.

Twelve years later, I was having dinner with Terry Hayes the

writer-producer of Beyond Thunderdome, (also known as Mad Max III) an action adventure movie which grossed about fifty million dollars in the United States in the Summer of 1985. He explained at some length his studies of Joseph Campbell's Hero of A Thousand Faces and claimed that the Mad Max series was imprinted with "the Jesus story." As there is a considerable literature devoted to the analysis of television's womanless hero who undergoes predictable travails and is sacrificed for the public good, it is only necessary here to point out that Mad Max fulfils the textbook stereotype.

It might be unscientific to build a thesis from two such widely disparate interviews with television producers, but there is sufficient other evidence from internal analysis of the programs and films to see that conscious mythbuilding has been obvious factor in the renaissance of the Australian film industry and the success of the television industry. For example, in the press at the moment, a lively debate is going on regarding Hayes' new mini-series Vietnam now being shot in Thailand. Clearly, according to a current press account (Brass, 1986) myth-making is in full swing. Hayes is quoted by Brass as claiming that the metaphor for Australia is a family, and the metaphor for Vietnam is a village. The village "becomes a Vietcong base so Australian troops burn it down and move the people to a new village. But the new village becomes more and more like a concentration camp."

Some scenes in the film will not be flattering to Americans. They rape one of the heroines, and, along with an Australian protagonist throw prisoners out of a helicopter. In an impassioned letter to the editor entitled "Vietnam and the Myths," (Clark, 1986), an ex-serviceman from Vietnam disputed the facts of the war which Terry Hayes had labelled as "the dirtiest ever fought." The directors of the mini-series, John Duigan and Chris Noonan were anti-war activists during the war period, with Duigan being involved in street theatre. It seems that the mini-series may attract controversy.

Underlying Realities .

While it is relatively easy to understand the effect of myth and ritual as expressed in filmed stories and national holidays, one has to delve deeper to find the more important underlying realities. For example, the powerful conflicting myths of the "free market" and the "controlled economy" are the yin and the yang of the media empires of our time. Even in communist countries, as the recent developments in China attest, as one's sway over human societies grows or wanes, the other's influence moves in the opposite direction. To this point, we can take as an example that national mythology affects national

telecommunications policy differently in different cultures. One interesting recent example can be taken from France where those arguing for the market forces in television wanted to break up the existing state monopoly which was seen to be run by rightists. This is in direct contradistinction to the American system where the conservatives were for the market.

When diametrically opposed parties in different countries are able to assume the same mythology of the benefits of the free market as a framework of action for their different purposes, the nature of myth lies exposed. This example also highlights the evanescent nature of myth which must vanish on close examination. The fact that myth is a way of perceiving the world, and not an insight nor a scientific law is a continuing annoyance to such groups as politicians and ideologues who use mythology for their own purposes. Clearly, social scientists are not immune from being affected by the mythology associated with academic speciality, as acculturation into just such a speciality is usually a lengthly ritualized process. While the scholars who are familiar with this line of argument may agree with this scenario, because of the momentum built up by myth in society, the theory predicts that they cannot change the perceptions of the mass of society. As for the producers of national films and television programs, it is clear that they should study their mythology and exploit it to capture their national audience.

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